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INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE 2781
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE 5346
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN IMMEDIATE 0370
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 0480
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
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RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
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RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001593

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2019
TAGS: [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST THE HOUTHIS
CONTINUE

REF: A. SANAA 2117
[1](#)B. RIYADH 1558
[1](#)C. RIYADH 1570
[1](#)D. RIYADH 1547

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Classified By: A/DCM SANDRA MUENCH FOR REASONS 1.4 (A), (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Saudi aerial bombardments and artillery shelling have continued in recent days against Houthi targets in the Saudi-Yemeni border area. The war of words with Iran also continued, with Iranian Speaker of the Parliament Ali Larjani condemning Saudi Arabia's offensive against fellow Muslims. In a meeting with USMTM Chief MG Van Sickle on December 5, Assistant Minister of Defense Khalid bin Sultan expressed frustration with the USG's slow response to Saudi Arabia's urgent requests for military equipment, particularly more surveillance and intelligence support. End Summary.

OPERATIONS AGAINST THE "TERRORIST INFILTRATORS" CONTINUE

[1](#)2. (C) According to December 7 Saudi press reports the Saudi military campaign against the Houthis (referred to in the Arabic-language Al-Watan as "terrorist infiltrators") along the Saudi-Yemeni border continues, employing Apache helicopters, artillery attacks and Bradley infantry vehicles, and focused in and around the mountains of Jabal al-Dud and Jabal al-Rumayh. Saudi naval patrols continue off the coast of Yemen, although according to Naval Commodore Ali al-Qarni "Naval forces...have not observed any smuggling activities in the past few days." A ten-kilometer strip along the Saudi side of the border has reportedly been cleared of civilians; it is not clear to what extent Saudi forces have been crossing into Yemeni territory to drive the Houthis away from the border area. Saudi forces have reportedly been laying wire mesh fences near the border to block ravines used by infiltrators to enter Saudi territory.

[1](#)3. (C) Pro-Houthi websites report the Houthis have opened a northern front in response to the Saudi offensive.

While it is clear that Houthi fighters continue to engage and harass the Saudis, there is little credible evidence to suggest any recent increase in Houthi forces or effectiveness.

RELOCATING SAUDI BORDER VILLAGES

¶4. (C) Assistant Minister of Defense Khalid bin Sultan remarked to the press on December 4 that some villagers evacuated from the 10-kilometer zone along the border want to return to their villages. On the same day King Abdullah announced that he has ordered 10,000 housing units to be constructed near Najran for the evacuated villagers. This new housing, in Prince Khalid's words, "will make up for the hard life the villagers had lived along the border before the war." The Ministry of Education has been tasked to open six new schools for 1,000 male and female students displaced by the fighting. (Embassy comment: Prior to the outbreak of fighting some villagers had expressed strong opposition to the Saudi government's imminent plans to construct a border fence along the Saudi-Yemeni border. It is likely that the Saudi government hopes to maintain the 10-kilometer clear zone for the indefinite future, or at least until the border fence is in place. End comment.)

CONTROLLING THE MESSAGE

¶5. (C) The prime focus of local media over the past week has been the deadly flooding that hit Jeddah on November 25; in some of these reports Saudi government officials have been held up to unprecedented criticism. While news

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of the fighting has been less prominent and extensive in recent days, reports about the campaign in the south have nonetheless provided the government with contrasting news of government fortitude and resolve. Saudi TV gave extensive coverage to the King's visit to the troops on December 4 and to Prince Khalid's visit to wounded Saudi soldiers on December 5.

JOUSTING WITH IRAN

¶6. (C) In a continuation of the war of words with Iran over the Houthi fighting, Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani issued a statement accusing the Saudis of fratricide. Larijani was quoted in the official Iranian press saying "I wonder how our Saudi brothers, who are Muslim, do such a thing as killing Muslims. If Saudis have rockets, why don't they use them against Israel instead of dropping them on poor innocent people? The Saudi government is Islamic and should not excite division among Muslims." (Embassy note: the official Iranian news agency is now referring to the Houthis as "Shia resistance fighters." End note.) While Iranian officials and media continue to accuse the Saudis of "killing innocent Muslims," the SAG appears to have stopped responding to such statements and local media sources have followed suit by focusing on other domestic events (reftel D).

U.S. ASSISTANCE TO THE SAUDI MILITARY

¶7. (S/NF) USMTM Chief MG Van Sickle met on December 6 with Prince Khalid to discuss U.S. efforts to resupply and assist the Saudi military. MG Van Sickle reported that USMTM is working with CENTCOM to coordinate over 50 separate immediate Saudi military crisis requirements. To date, the U.S. has delivered nearly 10 million rounds of ammunition, expedited the airlift return of four Apache helicopters, dispatched a LANTIRN

repair team, and is moving forward on other requests to resupply munitions. MG Van Sickle also reported that while initial Saudi support requests were for approved equipment and systems, many of the pending requests are for systems that have not yet cleared Washington approval processes. (Among the pending requests are for Predator support, AC-130 gunships and C-17 aircraft.)

18. (S/NF) Despite U.S. efforts, Prince Khalid expressed frustration with the slow pace of USG support. He said that Saudi Arabia is fighting in the interest of both his country and the United States, yet the U.S. is forcing him to seek the support from other governments to meet operational Saudi requirements during this time of national crisis.

COMMENT

19. (S) The Embassy regards the protracted Saudi military action as both a response to ongoing provocations from Houthi fighters and an attempt to achieve the larger objectives of driving the Houthis away from the border and establishing stronger Saudi control of key border areas. It is our assessment that Saudi military aerial and artillery attacks and limited tactical incursions into Yemeni territory will continue for days or weeks to come, but remain confined to the border area.
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